



Episode 14: Real Food Shopping Tips and Tricks

Katie: Katie, welcome back. Last week you were here talking about baby steps to eating real food and you shared some amazing tips on pantry staples and switching out some of those processed boxed foods that are so popular and that make dinnertime easy with real food options that are also simple and easy. This time I can't wait for us to dive in and talk about some of our favorite real food shopping tips and tricks. Welcome. Thanks for being here.

Katie Kimball: Thank you. You make me blush by using words like amazing, because I feel like all I do is little tiny things. I guess the little tiny things stack up, but I'm hoping that that's encouraging to the listeners too. They're normal. They're not amazing. They're normal little things that anyone can do and it's just a matter of stacking them up tall enough to reach your goal.

Katie: I love that. That's a great point. Your recipes, they are so good. I feel like for someone especially making the switch, just knowing what those little things are in the beginning, even if they are simple, can be so helpful. I know even a decade ago when I started this, there weren't as many blogs but I would find just a little tip on somebody's blog and be like, "Oh my gosh. Why didn't I think of that? That's so helpful." Your whole blog is that. Everything that you write is, "Oh my gosh. That's so helpful."

Katie Kimball: Oh, good.

Katie: One thing that you are also so exceptional at is that you have four kids. You have a lot of kids also and you also follow a budget as I do as well, I would love for us to talk about some of our favorite best places to shop, especially on a budget. Where are your go-to grocery stops?

Katie Kimball: I go to Costco and Aldi is kind of a new refreshed love in the last year and a half or so. In Michigan, we have Country Life Natural Foods where we can order in bulk. That would be similar to the one you mentioned on the last episode that as your standard ... The name's escaping right now, but there's another one that's maybe more of the West Coast. Any co-op would be similar to that. Ours is called Country Life, here in Michigan. I do go to Meijer. That's our big box store. I find myself going there less and less and less. It's almost down to just once or twice a quarter. Basically when I need vegetables that the others don't carry and it's not farmer's market season. That's the last place. Of course you've got to shop at the farmer's markets. Michigan, it's a really limited period. It's like two months where there's really good food there.

Katie: Yeah, we run into that too. I'm loving, right now, this time of year because everything's in season. We have asparagus where we live. We've been eating asparagus for pretty much every meal. We have kind of the same shopping options here.

Let's talk about Aldi a little bit because I know when I first got married I went in it and thought, "This is all kind of processed food." Or the produce wasn't really organic and I kind of was turned off to it, and then rediscovered it as well about a year ago and realized they have done a whole lot.

Katie Kimball: Yes.

Katie: Bringing in organic options and just more real food options. What do you look for at Aldi?

Katie Kimball: I do buy a lot of produce at Aldi. Every time I compare the prices of basic things like cucumbers and oranges and cherry tomatoes. Carrots, bananas, the things that we buy every single week, Aldi wins. That's kind of my standard because I know I need to refresh the perishables weekly. I'll do Costco maybe once a month, once every six weeks, and buy a ton of stuff because that's mostly my non-perishables. I don't end up getting a lot of produce at Costco.

For Aldi, a ton of produce. Their wild caught salmon is for sure the best price around that I've been able to find. We do kind of take advantage of their new Simply Nature organic line and their Live Gfree gluten free lines. I'll grab gluten free pasta and that's usually where we end up with our cereal for our once a week, our Friday cereal day. Their gluten free cereals are really good. The ingredients are ... It's surprising actually. When you read the ingredients on their processed foods, I'm always looking for the worst things. The soybean oil and the hydrogenated stuff and the artificials and the preservatives. I expect to see some things that I wouldn't use in my kitchen, and that's okay. That's part of the 80/20 for me. I try to stay away from the far extreme. The true chemicals that are only made in labs.

Aldi has adopted a policy that they won't use, in their brands, it's three things. MSG, artificial colors and something else really important. Maybe it's trans-fats. That's huge. I'm constantly impressed when I look at the ingredients of things. They have great organic tortilla chips. Costco's a better price for them, but if I know that we're not going to finish a whole bag or I need to take it somewhere where we just need a smaller bag, the organic corn chips are great.

They have some really good bars. Fruit and nut bars and nutty bars that are kind of like a Kind bar. Those, again, the ingredients are always surprisingly really good. As far as a couple other pantry staples, we do canned salmon there and their organic spaghetti sauce is really good. Great ingredients. No sugar. That makes it Whole 30 compliant, which is cool. That's really hard to find in tomato products.

Off and on, they'll have organic canned beans and canned tomatoes, which I like to have on hand for those days when I didn't soak my beans.

Katie: Yeah, definitely. We buy their canned salmon as well because it's wild caught and definitely the best price I have found at a store.

Katie Kimball: Oh yeah. Yep.

Katie: I'm excited to see they're bringing in ... Even I've found grass fed beef at ours a few times. We typically try to do a cow share when we can, but if we're running out or we typically run out of ground beef first, they're even a good place to find those kind of things now.

Katie Kimball: Yes, that's so true. That's so true. The last year I've been focusing a little more on budget. I thought really hard about our chicken purchases. I can get a whole chicken from a farmer who raises them amazingly well, so that's where I prefer to get my whole chicken. I'm just so busy nowadays that there are days when it's either I need to have some chicken breast or chicken thighs that are boneless and skinless that I can just throw in the crock pot and make or else we're going to end up going out. I thought, "What's better? Going out to a restaurant where who knows what is in there, or ordering in Chinese when, again, really who knows what? Certainly the meat is not sourced very well even if there are vegetables in your meal. Or going to Aldi and buying the conventional chicken?" That was the decision I made about a year ago. Once a month, once or twice a month, I'm just going to use Aldi chicken and I'm just going to say, "You know what? This is poorly raised and gross, but it's so much better than going out to eat." That's one more thing that we get at Aldi. Dirty little secret. Sorry.

Katie: No, I think it really truly is about balance. Like you said, if it prevents you from going out to eat, which for our family, not only could save a ton of money. Just one meal eating out is a lot.

Katie Kimball: Yeah.

Katie: But also, at least you could make everything else in that meal really good ingredients and you could add spices that are really healthful or extra vegetables, then you're still kind of winning in that regard.

Katie Kimball: Right. Versus the french fries that the kids would certainly choose if you were at a restaurant.

Katie: Exactly. Fried in the vegetables oils and trans fats and everything.

Katie Kimball: Yep.

Katie: How often do you guys go shopping? Is it once a week or are you there every other day? Do you try to do the once a month big shopping trip and get everything? What does that look like for you?

Katie Kimball: It is once a week or less. I'm pretty tight about it just because I can't afford any more time to go anywhere else. We usually get down to where I'm going, "Okay. We're down to carrots for dinner instead of carrots, cucumbers, pea pods and cherry tomatoes. It's time to go shopping." We're out of fresh food. It's maximum once a week. Sometimes I end up stretching it to once every two weeks and we do still end up with fresh vegetables the whole time but we end up with the things that last longer like carrots and cabbage salad instead of lettuce salad. I'll try to buy lettuce and cabbage. We use the lettuce first and then the cabbage lasts so long before you cut into it. We'll have cabbage salad the second week as I'm trying to figure out which day I can go.

Like I said, once every six weeks probably, I'll hit Costco and have a little bit of sticker shock on the checkout but I'm like, "Okay, I'm not going to come for another six weeks so this is okay." I know for things like cheese and frozen fruit and dried fruit, nuts, a lot of the purchases that I would get in bulk anyway, Costco's a better deal than Aldi. That's a real food shopping trick and that's really important to spend some time and write down your staples, the things that you buy regularly, and do a price compare. I was actually really surprised. I thought that Aldi would win on a couple of those things like cheese, but Costco hands down. It's a huge savings to get cheese at Costco. The caveat is you have to be able to finish it. My mother-in-law and father-in-law, she loves Aldi. If they tried to buy a 24 ounce block of cheese at Costco, they would throw away 18 ounces of it because it would get green and moldy before they finished it, because they're only two people. For her, she should totally get cheese at Aldi. For me, 24 ounces of cheese goes really alarmingly fast. Costco is the clear choice on that one.

Katie: I feel like at our house, because we don't do cheese that often and I try to choose good options when we can, but if I just left a block of 24 ounces of cheese on the counter, I'm pretty sure my kids could just eat it.

Katie Kimball: I think so. That's another compromise place. I don't always do raw, organic cheese just because it's not always easy to source, so I'll try to do ... Costco has the Kerrygold brand, which is at least better.

Katie: Yeah.

Katie Kimball: At least better sourced. It's kind of grass-fed-ish cows.

Katie: Those are delicious too. I've tried those. They're amazing.

Katie Kimball: They are good. At a certain point, you've just got to have something to eat.

Katie: Yeah, exactly. Starvation is not a good option for kids.

Katie Kimball: No.

Katie: In the next episode ... I can't wait for it next week. We're going to talk about teaching kids to cook real food, which you are definitely an expert at and you tie in your teaching skills and also your real food skills amazingly well for that. I'm curious. Do you take your kids shopping with you as well? I think that is high on my list of ways to make my own head explode is to take all six kids shopping. Do you do that? If so, how do you manage that?

Katie Kimball: No I would never take six kids shopping! No that's not true. Sometimes you would just have to. I wouldn't do it on purpose though. My big kids are in school now. My kids, just for reference, are 11, almost 8, 4 1/2 and 18 months. My two big kids are in school all day. Generally during the school year they never go shopping with me. Sometimes in the summer, they do end up with me or on Christmas break or something. It's great because they basically just help entertain the little ones and my oldest, Paul, I'll give him jobs and just kind of delegate. "Go get seven cucumbers," or whatever.

He knows what to do partly because when my kids are four and under or five and under and they're at home during the day, they definitely come with me. It's just an event. They don't always love it, but I think it's a good teaching experience or teaching opportunity in a lot of ways. It's a good way to teach about food. It's a great way to talk about numbers and counting. Again, we're talking the preschool and toddler age, because they're stuck. They're right there. They can't run away. They're in the cart and generally your littlest one is staring you right in the face like a foot away. It's a perfect opportunity to just talk. I always tell parents, "If you're stuck taking your kids grocery shopping, make it a teaching experience and just talk about what you're doing. 'Mommy's grabbing this and mommy's grabbing that. We're going to count our seven cucumbers.'" Obviously I always get seven for seven days in a week. We're going to count this and that and they might try to help weigh something. You can talk about how a scale works and here are the numbers.

For me, it's a really good chance and a reminder to practice a lot of those preschool skills and talk about the letters we see. My kids love helping at the checkout. At Aldi obviously the checker beeps everything and does it really fast but you have to bag your own. I'll kind of delegate some of the bagging and again, you can talk about counting and putting cold things together. Putting lightweight things together and heavy things on the bottom and lightweight on top. Even that, it doesn't sound like a skill but it's totally a preschool skill, to sort and organize and categorize. Anytime you're doing that, you don't even realize that you're helping to form your child's brain and help them become more mature and academically minded.

That's kind of what we do. When we're at Meijer, our big box store, you can do the self-checkout, which we always choose. The kids help me beep the groceries. Scan the groceries. We always call it beep the groceries. Especially when you have produce, you're constantly pressing the numbers on the keypad and weighing. There's a lot to do with math there. It's a great teaching opportunity and learning opportunity.

When I'm reading ingredients, they'll hear me say, "Ugh, nope. This one has yucky stuff in it," and they start to realize, "Mom doesn't keep everything that she picks up off the shelf. We have some standards here." It's not like I talk to my four year old about MSG and what it is, but he knows there are some yes foods and some no foods. When they're older, we do talk about reading ingredients and I teach them what to look for and what things we always put back on the shelf when we see a certain ingredient. They're like MSG and artificial sweeteners. Those are my two no exceptions, no holds barred. There are a lot of things that I would prefer to avoid, but if we're served something at a party or something, I'm not going to turn it down. Artificial sweeteners and MSG, no way. Too risky.

Katie: That's a good point, to have the non-negotiables, but then to have the leeway on some of the ones that you at home wouldn't necessarily choose but if you're out somewhere and there's an option you let your kids eat it. I think that's a great point. I usually now go shopping either late at night or I'll get up super early when the kids are still sleeping or my husband's still home and can stay with them, but the older ones do love going and they especially love the self-checkout. I think it's probably the best kitchen set ever, because they're actually really scanning it, but they love that.

Katie Kimball: Yep. Do you have a plan for the checkout gimmes? Are your kids like ... Do they get the gimmes when they see stuff?

Katie: Not really only because we've never ever bought those.

Katie Kimball: Yeah.

Katie: Sometimes I'll also bring a real food alternative if I know they're going to ask for stuff, and tell them, "If you wait until we get in the car, you can have whatever it is." A piece of chocolate or whatever, so they have something to look forward to. I love the tip you said about letting it be a teaching moment also. There was a study that came out recently about preschool aged children and how many words they hear per day being a predictor of future success.

Katie Kimball: Oh yeah?

Katie: The mere act of talking to our kids when they're little and just, like you said, explaining our day. It doesn't have to be that we're reading them a physics textbook, but just talking to them is such a great way to prepare their mind and just the way that they think and just to build that thought process. It's one of those things that I'm really grateful to my mom for doing. When I had my first child, she told me, "Just talk to them all day, even if they're not talking back, and it'll help them learn to speak and to widen their vocabulary." She did that with me and I'm sure people probably thought that she was crazy. She'll even tell stories about ... She went somewhere with me in a stroller and she was in an elevator talking about where we were going and what we were doing and this guy was like, "What are you ... Who are you talking to? What are you doing?" She's like, "I'm talking to my kid."

I'm so grateful that she did that because it gave me an example to do that for my kids. I think that is a really special thing when you're there with your little ones and you can let it be a fun teaching moment but they just see it as conversation.

Katie Kimball: Yeah. I think baby-wearing plays a big role in that too, in language development. Especially in a store. My kids are all three years apart. Every time I've had a one year old, I've had a four year old, etc, etc. Maybe the four year old is in the cart face to face with mom and the one year old is in the sling, so they're both right there. Right near my face. They can see my lips. They can see everything I grab. It's just such an experience in life. With and without talking you set your family culture. When I look at other carts and what's in them, it's always very different than what's in ours. Even without talking, my kids can see that this is how we shop. We have a ton of produce bags, and lo and behold, they came out of mommy's purse because we reuse the produce bags instead of grabbing a new one every time. Even without me saying anything, that just shows them that reusing and reducing our waste is normal and this is how life works, as opposed to grabbing a new plastic bag every single time you need a parsnip. As important as talking is, it's also a really interesting opportunity to silently create a culture of good stewardship and good eating habits.

Katie: Absolutely. Just leading by example. One thing we did recently on produce bags, because I was the same way for a long time. I would reuse them and I realized with seven cucumbers you can't even really fit in a produce bag. My girls are always wanting to sew and it's one of those things that I'm like, "Yeah, I should really do that with them." But then I have to supervise so much and it's such a mess, but I was like, "You know what? We'll make produce bags." That's simple. They can sew a straight line. They're not going to probably sew off their finger sewing a straight line, and now we have them. That was a fun mom and daughter day too.

Katie Kimball: Yes! What a great idea.

Katie: Any other great tips you have for sourcing real food on a budget? Whether it's stores, how you meal plan? Any other great tips to share?

Katie Kimball: Just one and it's the opposite of sourcing. For a long time I would make sure I bought the least expensive stuff or saved the most money when I walked into the store, but I didn't really think about how I used it on the other end. I realized that no matter how inexpensive you can get your cut of meat or your side of beef or whatever. If you're using two or three pounds of meat in every meal, your end of month budget is still going to be quite high. If you're really working on a budget, you're going to want to plan meals with a budget in mind. I have a system where I try to have at least one meal that's meatless with beans or beans and rice per week because clearly that's going to be a super inexpensive meal. We also try to do something simple like cream of vegetable soup. That's homemade chicken stock, any leftover veggies you've got, some potatoes, which are inexpensive, and then a homemade bread on the side. That's another inexpensive meal that doesn't use beans or rice that we try to make sure gets in every couple weeks, just so that meal is less money and therefore I know that we'll end up saving in the long run by how we eat instead of what we buy.

Katie: That's a great point too. I know it probably drives you crazy, it drives me crazy when I find food in the back of the fridge that that I bought and forgot to use because it wasn't in the plan. I think that's a great point is to plan around a budget and also make sure everything you have can be used completely in that shopping trip or in that week and that you're not going to have food go to waste or you're not going to need to use, like you said, three pounds of beef in a meal because you can add in extra veggies or other food as well.

Katie Kimball: Absolutely. I tend to use a half to three quarters of a pound of beef and fill in with lentils or something like that. That's another way to really watch the budget, is just to cook up a bunch of ground beef and split it into to bags that are pre-portioned at about, again, half to three quarters of a pound, use it the same way you'd use a pound and the rest of the casserole or soup will just kind of fill in.

Katie: That's a great one. I like to, like you mentioned earlier, keep it pre-made and frozen because it doesn't really stick together once you cook it. You can just dump in frozen ground beef into meals really easily and that saves a lot of time. Not having to actually cook the beef when you need it.

Katie Kimball: For sure. Remember to thaw it the night before. A chunk, a pound of raw ground beef is a process. You have to either thaw it at least 24 hours in advance or you're going to break it up for half an hour in the pan if you're not going to use a microwave, which we don't. Whereas a pound of cooked ground beef, you're done. Pull it out. Throw it in.

Katie: Yeah, exactly. Those are great tips. Thanks again for being here and I can't wait for our next episode when you're going to share some wisdom on teaching kids to cook real food, which I think is something you do so well. My kids have loved the course that you created. Everyone, please join us next week for an episode about that, and Katie, thanks for being here.

Katie Kimball: Great, thank you too Katie.